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## Three Books on Free Will : Essay Review

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**Christian List: *Why Free Will Is Real*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press. 2019. 215 p.**

**Denis Alexander: *Genes, Determinism, and God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017. 385 p.**

**John C. Lennox: *Determined to Believe? – The Sovereignty of God, Freedom, Faith, and Human Responsibility*. Oxford: Monarch Books. 2017. 368 p.**

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Issues surrounding free will and responsibility are hotly debated in science, theology and philosophy. Scientists and philosophers worry about recent neuroscientific and psychological results suggesting that humans exert less control over their mental states and actions as often thought. This raises difficult questions about the extent to which people actually consciously control their behaviour at all. In addition, the classical theological and philosophical problem of free will still generates much heat among theologians and philosophers, no doubt because of its central role in the identity of different Christian denominations. Free will has a central role in many religious, especially Christian doctrines, including sin, salvation and sanctification.

In what follows, I will review three recent books that deal with these issues. Philosopher Christian List argues in his book *Why Free Will Is Real* for the existence of rather strong notion of free will. For the most part, he focuses on defusing numerous scientific challenges presented against free will. Denis Alexander, a Cambridge biologist, examines the free will issue in the light of contemporary genetics and developmental studies in his book *Genes, Determinism, and God*. Finally, Oxford mathematician and well-known Christian apologist John Lennox discusses free will and Biblical texts in his book *Determined to Believe? – The Sovereignty of God, Freedom, Faith, and Human Responsibility*.

### **Three Questions on Free Will**

Before we go any further, it is useful to distinguish four questions structuring free will debates. First, we must ask for the definition of free will. What exactly is it that we are talking about? For introductory purposes, I will take free will to be the agent's ability to exert some kind of control over her mental states and actions in such a way that the agent can be held responsible for those states and actions. As we will see, authors like List and Lennox associate this control with making choices between alternative possibilities. Such views are often considered components of *libertarian* free will.

It is useful to follow philosopher Alfred Mele (2014) in distinguishing three basic views on free will. According to *free will light*, free will is the capacity for rational decision-making. If an agent makes a deliberate decision without external or internal compulsion, such a decision and the subsequent action are

considered free. Some authors, like List and Lennox, add another condition to this picture: *free will regular* states that the world and human brain need to be such that there are alternative possibilities open to the agent at the moment of decision. In other words, it is not enough to act rationally and free of compulsion, but the world must exhibit deep openness so that human agents can influence it. This *alternative possibilities* condition is at the heart of the debate. Finally, *free will premium* is the view that even deep openness is not enough: in order to exert control over her action, the agent's action must be such that it is directly caused by the agent and uncaused by everything else. In this case, the agent's conscious self will have a special kind of power, sometimes called *agent-causation*, which is ultimately responsible for the agent's action.

Second, there is the question of meaning and significance of free will. Why is free will important at all? In the end, debates on free will are meaningless, if it does not really matter whether we have free will or not. The debate is driven by the assumption that humans cannot be responsible for their actions, if they lack free will. So, if free will is lost, so will be our responsibility practices, like praising, blaming and punishing.

Third, we must ask whether free will is compatible with determinism. *Libertarians* maintain that because determinism rules out genuine choices between alternative possibilities, free will is incompatible with determinism. Furthermore, they maintain that humans are nevertheless free in this sense. As a consequence, libertarians defend regular or premium views on free will. Opposed to this, *compatibilist* argue that free will regular is enough: humans have free will but it is compatible with determinism. Finally, there are *free will sceptics* who often agree with libertarians about the conditions of free will but then argue that those conditions are not fulfilled in the human case. In other words, humans have no free will.

In its simplest form, *determinism* is the thesis that at any single point in time, only one future is possible. Conversely, *indeterminism* is the denial of this thesis. Determinism comes in different kinds depending on what exactly is doing the determining work. If the physical world is deterministic, for every event, there is a physical cause that, in conjunction with the laws of nature, makes its effect necessary. So, given the laws of nature and the sum of past physical events, there is only one way that the future can go. Such *physical determinism* is a controversial notion, since many scientists agree upon the possibility of probabilistic causation. Further, there are open empirical questions regarding quantum indeterminism and complex systems theory that suggest indeterminism at the basic physical level.

One can also argue for determinism in a different way. Perhaps the basic physical world is indeterministic but the mechanisms that operate at the level of the agent's brain and environment are deterministic, again raising the compatibility problem. The suggestion of contemporary neurosciences and biology is that there are many different kinds of non-voluntary causes that influence human decisions and actions. Perhaps *genetic determinism* is true and human actions are made necessary by genes. Perhaps something like *neurobiological determinism* is true, where human brains cause actions in such a way that conscious reasons are irrelevant. There is also a brand of *theological determinism* that has generated much debate, especially during and after the Reformation. Calvinists and Lutherans often maintain that God's sovereign will

and omniscience are such that humans have no choice between alternative possibilities.

## **Why Free Will Is Real**

Now that we have a conceptual map of the landscape, we can move onto examine the specific contributions of the books in question. I will begin with List's book *Why Free Will Is Real*, because it introduces the notion of free will and contemporary scientific challenges to it in an informative and concise way. I would recommend List's book to novices in the field as it explains the issues clearly and offers innovative solutions. The book's relatively short length also counts in its favour.

List provides an analysis of the ordinary, everyday concept of free will and seeks to defend it against criticisms coming from the sciences. According to List, our everyday notion of free will comes close to free will regular or premium. In order to be responsible for an action, an agent must fulfil three conditions. First, the agent has to perform the action intentionally, that is, the agent must be able to become conscious of her actions and that action cannot be an accident. Second, there is a counterfactual condition: the agent could have acted otherwise, if she had so chosen. Free actions cannot be necessary. Finally, the agent must be in control of the action in question. Here control is understood as the appropriate relationship between the agent's mental states, such as intentions and beliefs, and the action itself. The agent is the source or the author of her action, not the environment or antecedent causes independent from the agent.

From the aforementioned three conditions, List forms a picture of free will as three-part capacity (p. 16):

1. The capacity of an agent to act intentionally.
2. The capacity of an agent to make choices and decisions between alternative possibilities.
3. The capacity of an agent to control her actions, in other words, to be a source of her actions.

List also recognises the ultimate importance of such free will. It is embedded in our concept of agency itself. Agency is the ability to make choices and deliberate between alternative possibilities. Without agency, humans could not be moral or even act rationally. Without free will, humans could not choose between different moral reasons for actions, which is what practical rationality is about. Following German philosopher Immanuel Kant, List argues that our everyday conception of agency implicitly forces such a view on us: we automatically assume that others and we are such agents. List is convinced that we do not just assume our agency, we in fact have agency.

List's defence of free will proceeds via debunking three scientific challenges to free will that correspond to the three capacities mentioned above. The first is the challenge from radical materialism or *eliminativism*. According to this, intentionality, will and goal-directedness are folk notions that have no role in science at all. In reality, humans are physical mechanisms that intend nothing. In addition, there is no "self" or centre of consciousness that actions can be

attributed to. Since free will requires intentionality and there is no such thing, there is no free will, or so goes the argument.

The second challenge to free will is directed against the human capacity to make choices. The challenge itself is simple: our best science shows that not only is the basic physical world determined, so is the human brain, the engine of our decisions and choices. Because determinism is true, there can be no free will.

The third challenge is related to control and neurobiological determinism. List calls this the challenge from *epiphenomenalism*. A number of psychologists and neuroscientists have argued that our consciously accessible mental states, such as beliefs, intentions and decisions, are not causally related to our actions. Rather than being the sources of our actions, our mental states are epiphenomenal, namely, they appear in conjunction of our actions but do not cause them. If true, it follows that our actions are not products of our conscious minds, but cognitive and social mechanisms working outside our consciousness. Like psychologist Daniel Wegner and neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga have argued, there is plenty of evidence revealing thoroughgoing automatism in human action. Conscious decisions are often post hoc rationalizations of actions that are driven by non-conscious causes. If this applies to all human action, we must conclude that humans are not in control of their actions the way free will requires.

List answers these challenges in innovative ways. Regarding intentionality, List argues that eliminativists have not been able to describe and explain human behaviour by reference to neurobiological mechanisms only. In other words, folk-psychological language of intentions, beliefs and other mental states is necessary to accurately describe and predict human behaviour. This indispensability suggests, according to List, that there is something substantial behind folk psychological language, that is, actual cognitive capacities that make a difference in human action. Thus, usefulness of folk psychology supports the existence of free will.

Regarding the second challenge, the challenge of determinism, List provides an innovative response. He accepts neither standard libertarianism nor standard compatibilism. List argues that the aforementioned capacities of free will are indeed compatible with physical determinism but not with neurobiological or psychological determinism. He calls his view *compatibilist libertarianism* (p. 9). What List does is that he invokes the idea of *levels of nature*. Nature is a stratified whole where each level has some measure of independence from the underlying substrate. This emergentist picture of nature is already familiar to many from previous literature arguing for *non-reductive physicalism* (Murphy & Brown 2007). What List needs to show is that psychological and neurobiological determinism are false, or at least we have no good reason to think they are true.

List suggests that intentional, “agential” level of description is somewhat autonomous from the underlying physical base. Because the agential level is *multiple realisable*, namely, one psychological state can be realised by a number of different physical states of the brain, we cannot infer from physical determinism to psychological determinism. In other words, human psychology might very well be indeterministic even while the underlying brain and physical world were deterministic. Furthermore, there is scientific evidence suggesting that people actually make choices and decisions that can be best explained by

invoking their intentions and beliefs. Many human choices and decisions are such that they can only be explained probabilistically, not deterministically. Again, this means that the psychological process leading up to such actions is not deterministic.

Responding to the challenge of epiphenomenalism, List first argues for the possibility of *mental causation*, namely, the idea that mental states, like intentions and beliefs, can be causally efficacious in ways that brain states that realise them are not. Human minds really do cause actions. Next, he invokes scientific evidence of the efficacy of intentions, reasons and decisions on human action. What people decide to do makes a difference with respect to those actions. Consciously accessible reasons and choices are indispensable in explaining human action, which point to their reality.

Given the above, List concludes that rather than pointing away from free will, current scientific evidence points to its reality. Of course not all humans fully realise their capacity of free will in all circumstances. Nevertheless, most normally developing humans at least have these capacities potentially present.

As a whole, I found List's book very well argued and useful. It is sometimes even too concise and assumes some philosophical knowledge from the reader. I do have a significant critical point. List does not really engage with libertarianism versus compatibilism debate in any detail. After he has argued that the ability to make choices is part of the everyday picture of free will, he goes on to assume the whole libertarian picture. There is an extensive debate on this in the literature that List basically puts aside. If one is previously convinced by compatibilist arguments, one finds very little in List's book to change one's view. Moreover, List must know that there are philosophically sophisticated attempts to maintain moral responsibility while rejecting free will completely (Pereboom 2014) but he seems to disregard these completely.

## **Genetic Determinism and Modern Genetics**

Biologist Denis Alexander presents strong scientific arguments against genetic determinism in his book *Genes, Determinism, and God*. Although the book has both "determinism" and "God" in the title, it is mostly about "genes". The early chapters of the book examine the history of nature versus nurture debate from Ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary genetics. Then come a number of chapters outlining latest genetics. After that, Alexander examines specific areas of social life and behaviour where genetics have been applied. These include sex differences, political behaviour and the legal system. Of the 12 chapters of the book, only the last two deal with philosophical and theological issues.

According to Alexander, *hard genetic determinism* is the view that the trajectories of human lives, characters and behaviours are not really in control of human agents, but are instead made necessary by their genetic makeup (1 p.). This claim, Alexander notes, is almost universally rejected by contemporary geneticists but it nevertheless has a life of its own in popular discourse and in the media portrayal of genetic research. The book is a sustained deconstruction of hard genetic determinism and all the popular-level dichotomies that go with it, including the distinction between genes and culture, genes and development and "hard-wired" and learned.

Alexander maintains that modern behavioural genetics does suggest a causal connection between genes, development and behaviour, but this connection is far from being anything like “determining” or “necessitating” in the case of normal development. Alexander calls this view is (rather confusingly, in my view) *soft determinism*, according to which “given our particular genomes, our lives are more likely to follow one particular future” (277 p.). Normal human development and behaviour are results of a very complex biological, social, cultural and psychological process, which does not preclude the possibility of free will. Certain genes makes some traits more likely than not but this does not rule out conscious influence of individual decisions and choices. It is, after all, because of our human (rather than ant, banana or lion genome) that “we develop into creatures who do have the massive computing capacities that enable free will to become an ontological reality” (278 p).

In the light of this point, it is important to remember that there are certain conditions under which an agent’s genetic makeup indeed has a negative impact on that agent’s free will, sometimes completely removing it. As is the case with brains and the human mind as a whole, there are many different disorders that can inhibit the development of psychological capacities that are required for free will. One’s genetic makeup can lead to deficiencies in self-control, decision-making and intentional actions. If disorders are severe enough, such capacities do not develop at all. In this specific sense, certain human individuals might be “determined” to be incapable of having free will. It also shows how capacities for free will come in degrees: like many human capacities, there is a lot of variation here. In any case, most normally developing human beings tend to develop such capacities to the extent that moral responsibility is possible.

Surprisingly, the overall view that Alexander ends up with is not too removed from List. First, Alexander defines free will as the capacity of agents to make choices between alternative courses of actions (2 p.). Such choices are often accompanied by a specific experience of “up-to-usness”, a sense of conscious decision-making. Furthermore, Alexander believes that choices of this kind make humans apt subjects of moral responsibility. Like List and Lennox, he takes free will as a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Alexander also mentions a number of empirical studies suggesting that belief in free will has significant, positive effects on human moral and social life. If people believe they are determined and have no choice, they cheat more, become more anti-social and hopeless, they are less capable of goal-oriented behaviour as a whole. Thus, belief in free will seems important for humans and there would most likely be a significant social and moral price, if people were forced to reject free will.

Regarding the compatibility of genetics and free will, Alexander leans towards a similar picture of personhood than List. Alexander calls his view *Developmental Dual-Aspect Monistic Emergentism* or DAME. Humans are physical organisms but their mental processes are neither identical nor reducible to lower-level, biological or physical processes. The view is “monistic” because it rejects the complete independence of mind from matter. It is “dual-aspect”, because it maintains that the mental and physical are indeed real and causally efficacious. Here Alexander’s views are rather general for philosophical readers. This is understandable, since the task of the book is more scientific than philosophical. Nevertheless, taking into account the larger philosophical

discussion on emergence and levels of science could have significantly strengthened his argument.

As for the social and moral applications of genetics in law, politics, ethics and other domains, Alexander remains somewhat critical and sceptical. Because of the multi-causal nature of human behaviour, we must be very careful when drawing ethical, political and moral conclusions from genetics. Genetics will not replace courts and judicial procedures, provide us a way to effectively organise our society or solve our moral questions.

Compared to Lennox and List, *Genes, Determinism, and God* is the most science-heavy of the three books. It is also the most extensive: Alexander spends many chapters explaining behavioural genetics and the nature of genetic explanation. This is all very useful for those, who are not so familiar with contemporary genetic research. However, the book is rather thin (almost insufficient) in philosophical analysis. In this sense, I would recommend reading it with a more philosophically erudite volume, like List's.

## **Determined to Believe**

Now we will move onto theology of free will. Because of the centrality of the doctrines of sin and grace during and after the Reformation, Christian denominations, especially Calvinism and Lutheranism, have debated these issues with no end in sight (Timpe 2014). Luther's own free will scepticism is well-known: in his debate with Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525) argues very strongly against any kind of free will. Luther takes the capacity to make choices between morally significant alternative possibilities as constitutive of free will. However, humans have no choice, because God determines everything and ultimately controls the moral character of human agents.

Luther argues for theological determinism on the basis of God's foreknowledge and a specific kind of psychological determinism. God not only knows the future but is also in complete providential control of historical events. Furthermore, even human psychology is not under the control of human agents. As Luther puts it, either Devil or God drives human actions. The agent is unable to make herself such that she could have significant moral choices available to her.

Such a strong view of psychological and moral determinism is necessary for Luther in order to safeguard the absolute sovereignty of God's grace and the gift of righteousness. Humans are, as St. Paul teaches according to Luther, completely dependent on God for their salvation. If humans could make morally significant choices between good and evil actions, they could, in principle, act in such a way as to become righteous by their own actions in the eyes of God. This, however, cannot be possible, since it would negate grace as the absolute gift of God to the sinner. Without such ultimate dependency, the core of the Gospel would be compromised, Luther argues: the gift of grace would no longer be a gift, if a human agent could in any way contribute to her righteousness. Since faith in God is what makes a person righteous, faith itself is something that is given by God without any previous act by the sinner herself.

Following this line of argument, Calvin argued that humans have no choice in moral and spiritual matters. Because of their sinful state, they can no



more choose to do good than they can to choose to have faith in God. Both are God's gracious gifts. In the case of both Luther and Calvin, such views lead to strong views of predestination.

Predestination and theologically motivated psychological determinism lead Calvin and Luther to well-known problems. How can humans be responsible for their actions, especially evil ones, at all, if have no choice and lack control over their actions? As List argues, our everyday view of free will entails both control and the ability to choose. Theological determinism rules these out, so humans cannot be responsible for their actions at all. Calvin and Luther are forced to the uncomfortable conclusion that the link between free will and responsibility must be severed completely. They must maintain human responsibility without control or choice. The problem is that this makes God look morally questionable, even unjust and evil: only an unjust God can blame humans for actions that they did not choose or control. Furthermore, it seems that God himself is responsible for all human sin and evil: if it is up to God whether humans act morally, God is blameworthy for human evil. This makes the problem of evil almost impossible to solve.

In his book *Determined to Believe*, John Lennox argues against this whole line of reasoning. For many contemporary Calvinists, humans are indeed responsible for their actions and their faith in God even without having any kind of choice. As pointed out above, this severs the connection between choice and responsibility, thereby creating a difficult tension between our everyday notion of free will and Biblical teaching. According to Calvinists, this is a bullet that theologians must bite. Similarly, a Calvinist insists that Christians should accept that God indeed determines, knows and even has control over our evil actions but is nevertheless not responsible for them. Lennox's resolutely anti-Calvinist book is a sustained argument based on reflection of Biblical passages that seeks to dismantle such arguments.

The early chapters of the book are the most interesting. There, Lennox defines the terms and examines some arguments contemporary Calvinists make. Regarding the definition of free will, Lennox adopts a thick, regular or even premium free will: free will is the capacity to make choices (28 p.). Furthermore, such a capacity is constitutive of moral action and human rationality as a whole, as C. S. Lewis has argued. Given this definition, it is easy to see why Lennox takes free will to be of absolute importance. Without free will, human agents would be incapable of moral behaviour, such as loving and caring. Without free will, there could be no moral responsibility. These claims already reveal Lennox's answer to the compatibility question: any kind of determinism, whether physical, theological or neurobiological, will rule out human agency and morality. Given all the above, Lennox comes out as a very strong libertarian.

The overall argument of *Determined to Believe* is rather difficult to discern. Nevertheless, it could be perhaps characterised as follows. First, Lennox argues that the Scripture implicitly assumes the everyday picture of free will as the capacity to control one's actions and make morally significant choices between alternative possibilities. He then goes on to argue that the Scripture, unlike Calvin and Luther's interpretation, indeed links responsibility and free will together. Since Biblical texts often blame and praise people for their faith and moral actions and since they affirm the everyday view of free will, it follows that Scriptures actually teach that faith and moral action are, at least to some

extent, under the control of human agents. In other words, Calvin, compatibilists and theological free will sceptics are wrong: the Bible teaches, or at least assumes, libertarianism about free will. Moral actions and faith in God are up to human agents in such a way that is incompatible with determinism. It follows from this that theological determinism is a huge mistake, incompatible with Biblical ideas of humanity and God. Our doctrines of sin and grace, our idea of faith as well as our picture of predestination and God's knowledge and sovereignty must be rethought in the light of this basic conclusion.

Regarding sin and grace, Lennox maintains that although humans have been affected by sin, it has not completely destroyed their capacity to make morally significant choices. St. Paul, Jesus and many other characters in the Bible constantly appeal to people, issue warnings and commands and plead them to turn towards God and act in a righteous way. Such commands and appeals would be irrational, if humans did not have the capacity to make such choices at all. If nothing else, whether one turn towards God asking for help and faith, is in some sense in the control of the individual. It follows from this, that absolute views of predestination must also be mistaken. The Bible does not teach, according to Lennox, that God predetermines who is saved and who is not. Salvation is offered to all people but only some choose to accept it.

Finally, Lennox adopts an open picture of God's providence and knowledge. Among philosophers of religion, *Open Theism* has gathered strong support in the last two or three decades. Lennox joins this line of thinking. According to Open Theism, God's knowledge of the future is not determining or causing the future. Since libertarian choices of humans cannot be predetermined, God's providence is not determining either. God can affect the circumstances and shape people's lives in different ways but he cannot make one possible course of future events necessary without overriding free will. Similarly, God's knowledge of the future does not include free choices of individual humans.

Lennox's book was a somewhat disappointing read in many ways. For one, it lacks philosophical sophistication. Lennox does not really engage with contemporary philosophical debate on free will. Instead of arguing for his position in detail, he simply assumes the truth of libertarianism and does not consider well-known and powerful objections to it. In order to make his case more plausible, he should have examined arguments attempting to show why alternative possibilities are not required for moral responsibility. Philosophers have extensively discussed such arguments since 1960s and Lennox seems out of his depth in disregarding them.

It is also disappointing that Lennox whole argument is basically a Biblical one but he does not really engage with contemporary historical-critical scholarship at all. For this reason, Lennox sometimes provides only idiosyncratic interpretations of his own.

Finally, the book is also theologically somewhat disappointing. Lennox takes aim at popular Calvinist writers without going into their theological arguments in any detail. Contemporary philosophical theologians have produced powerful defences of theologically motivated compatibilism (e.g., Couenhoven 2013, Bignon 2018) but Lennox does not discuss these at all. Of course, I might be expecting too much from a popular-level book. Nonetheless, I would have been more impressed by Lennox, if he had provided more solid scholarship to back up his arguments.

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